

A Journal From Africa

Stories from my year in college at Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in Ghana, West Africa in 1982, and my journey home there after 24 years.

ABOUT ME



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My Son, My Mirror

I just returned from a month in Ghana after making my Baha'i Pilgrimage, and I knew my next entry would be about my son Samuel. For some reason, this story was a challenge to write. And during a moment of meditation at the Shrine of Baha'u'llah, the resting place of the Founder of the Baha'i Faith, the reasons appeared to me.

I love my son Alex because I see in him the person I am striving to become - positive, quietly confirmed in his faith, optimistic, outgoing and engaging, always giving of himself, and always gracious and humble to accept of the assistance of others. My love for Sammy is just as strong, but manifests itself differently. In Sammy I see so much of myself and I realized that much of each of our characters was defined by growing up in broken families.

Alex grew up with the security a mother and father who expected the best from their children, but also showered them with love and gave them a solid foundation to fall back on as they navigate their way into adulthood.

Sammy and I did not.

Sammy was raised by his mother, but his father left when Sammy was 12 years old. Sammy's primary father figure was Uncle Alex Sr., Alex's biological father. In the Akan cultures, remember that the name in Twi for "father" and "father's brother" are the same word, and this manifests itself in the culture such that the brothers and sisters of biological parents step into the role of father and mother to all children in the extended family.

But with Sammy's father leaving, he was suddenly required to grow up quickly and take on many of the responsibilities that a father would in a family of 11 children. My experience was similar, surviving my parents' divorce when I was 17 and suddenly responsible for the upbringing of my younger brother.

Our parents did the best they could with the capacities they had available to them, and Sammy and I have discussed this in depth. We both have been able to support each other in finding a path to forgiveness, acceptance and unconditional love for our parents.

The result of such an upbringing is profound. We tend to be loners, we are comfortable with solitude, we have a fear of failure which makes it hard for us to pursue our interests and passions in life, and we have a hard time accepting help from others when its offered. We are caught in a world of survival.

A husband leaving his wife and family was a rarity in Ghana when I lived there in 1982. Thirty years ago, traditions were much more intact. Marriage was seen as an institution for providing the means to raise a family, and building a secure foundation for family members including the extended family in that foundation. Culturally, careful steps were in

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place to ensure that through the process of courtship and engagement the couple was assisted by parents and grandparents to assess each character, compatibility of each individual and the compatibility of the families that would be joined in the union.

This foundation for a family manifested itself in different ways. The eldest living member of a family is given the responsibility to sort out quarrels and disputes and family members abide by an unwritten contract which they believe is enforced by the *Nananom* *Nsamamfo*, who are the Ancestors in the next world. *Juju*, or magic, is also a powerful part of the belief system, whereby cause and effect on a spiritual level

play a part in everyone's lives. If you do harm to another person, there will be repercussions on a metaphysical level.

One of my most cherished interests is in the Akan proverbs which also assist in keeping the bonds of marriage and family strong. When I was a student at KNUST, I had the opportunity to sit with a fetish priestess and discuss the proverbs with her. Typically, the grandmothers of the family are charged with the responsibility of providing advice, often using the proverbs. The following are just a few of these beautiful gems of wisdom:

- *Nea oforo dua pa na wopia no*. The one who climbs a good tree is the one who is helped. (Well-thought plans will bring others who will want to assist you.)
- *Nea wonom ho no wonnware ho*. One should not bathe in the water others drink. (Do what is right, not what is convenient.)
- *Onipa ye de*. Mankind is sweet (No man should live in isolation.)

The origins of the proverbs are not known. The earliest western account of them appears to be by a British explorer named Mary Kingsley in the late 1800's. It can be deduced that if the history of Okomfo Anokye takes place during the late 1600's, the proverbs are at least that old. Okomfo Anokye was one of Alex's mother's people, the Nzima, who come from the coast of Ghana further west of Takoradi near the border of Cote d'Ivoire. It is believed that he was a priest who had supernatural powers, and was responsible for having brought down the Golden Stool from the gods in the heavens to the Asante people, which resulted in a constitution and a federation among all of the Akan peoples. My own personal feeling is that he was a Manifestation of God, and the golden stool is symbolic of knowledge from God which every Manifestation has brought in his teachings to further the progress of mankind. The proverbs also reflect this divine wisdom.

Ghana has experienced political stability and economic growth ranging from 10% to 14% each year for the last 25 years, the country has also experienced a shift in cultural traditions as young people become focused on western values. The result has been a fracturing of the extended family and a weakening of the traditional value system which provided structural integrity to communities. So many children living in the cities are not aware of the proverbs, and their grandparents are increasingly becoming expendable rather than the moral anchor of the family.

And along with westernization has come a western perspective on relationships. Rather than the cultural norm of being a community member first and an individual second, people are becoming more accustomed to leaving a tough situation rather than trying to make it work for the greater good. And with the safety net of grandparents and the extended family disintegrating, assistance is also disappearing. Sammy experienced this when his father moved to Moree. I experienced this when I was 17.

Two years ago, I started to get phone calls from Alex who was very scared. He told me that Sammy had disappeared and no one knew where he was at. Sammy would return after a few months, but would say nothing about where he had been and what he was doing. And after a couple months he would disappear again. I tried to talk to Sammy about this, but he would not open up to me.

So last year, I sat Sammy down outside the wall surrounding Uncle Prince's house just above the valley the house overlooks. It was strangely quiet that day, only the breeze blowing through the valley and the hawks lazily soaring in circles over the silk cotton trees.



"Sammy, you know I love you with the love of a father that you never had. I want to help, but if you can't tell me what is troubling you, we can't come up with a solution. So I am here to listen. No advice unless you want it. No judgment. No criticism. Just to listen."

Sammy looked at me, and then took a leap of faith and trust with me. He told me that he had originally saved money from welding jobs in order to build a welding shop with his best friend. His friend swindled him out of the land purchase and he lost everything he had saved. His mother had been pressuring him since he was now 22, to bring money home and support his brothers and sisters. Her pressure became so great that he had to leave home and go to the gold mines to work hard labor digging in the mines in order to earn some small amount of money to bring home, and buy some time until his mother's pressure started again. This cycle continued for another year, and Sammy had become quiet and sullen. The spark in his eye was nowhere to be found, and his wonderful humor that makes everyone laugh was gone.

We had been visiting a friend named Danquah in Yamoransa regularly. He owns a

computer repair shop, and he was always busy with customers bringing their PCs for repair. Danquah was open to talking about what Baha'is believe in, so Sammy, Alex, Uncle Prince and I would go visit him a couple days a week and discuss world events and what the Baha'is believe are the solutions to these problems. And every time we would visit, Sammy inevitably ended up looking over Danquah's shoulder, fascinated with what he was doing.

I asked Sammy if he was interested in computers. He looked at me in shock. "How did you know, Wofa Yaw?" I told him I had been watching every day we went to the shop, and it was clear that he had a passion for them. After I pointed out to Sammy that his disappearing was a short term solution that would not resolve the long term situation, I asked Sammy if he wanted to go to school to study computers in order to have a viable trade so that one day he can get married and have a family of his own.

Sammy was stunned. He responded, "But Wofa Yaw, I can't..." I told Sammy that rule number one in our relationship is that we will never say 'I can't' to each other. This was particularly hard for me to say to him because I see that quality in myself, always cautious and always afraid that the worst that could happen. But as a father, I couldn't show him my fear. My job was to provide a foundation for him to leap off of, and ensure that he was safe in doing so.

Sammy revealed to me that with his father's leaving, so did any hope to go to secondary school because of financial reasons. Sammy had no education and no future. He was backed into a corner and giving up. And it was a shameful experience for him to be so stuck in life, like being trapped in adolescence while watching your friends move on, never allowed to fully grow up and never allowed to be entitled to a future. I think my heart broke, sitting there and looking out at the valley. No child should ever be limited by circumstances, deprived of a future and deprived of having hopes and dreams.

I told Sammy not to worry about that right now, and that together we will get this all sorted out. I told him that he has my commitment as a father which was witnessed by the Ancestors, and since the Ancestors sent him as my gift of my son, that I will never let him fall again and that we will see through this together. Sammy promised to work on making a plan.

Soon, Sammy found an introductory certificate program at one of the computer schools in Cape Coast that did not require a secondary school certificate. We agreed that this was the first step, and that we should pray for doors to continue to open. Soon Sammy was in school, and enjoying every minute of it. And he discovered he was a good student. In fact so good, that one of his teachers hired him to work as an intern at his repair shop last summer. Sammy later got accepted into a prominent computer college in Accra where he has been able to arrange with the college for him to complete his secondary school certificate along side his three year program in computer network maintenance.

One of the most profound Akan proverbs is *Se wo were fi na wo san kofa a yenkyi*. This means, "It is not taboo to return and take what you have forgotten." Sammy is doing just that, cleaning up his past and going back to collect what is rightfully his.

What brings me the greatest joy is that during my last trip to Ghana this summer, my happy son Sammy was back. Alex, Sammy and I went to visit a friend of mine in Accra, where we stayed a couple of days. One morning I woke up early, so I walked into the boys room to check on them. They were awake, but not out of bed yet. I sat at the end of Sammy's bed and the three of us talked and laughed. It was one of those small moments that I wish I could stop time and live in that moment for a lifetime.

The first week that Sammy went to classes at his new college in Accra, I called him to check on him and see how things are going. The excitement in his voice was palpable. I said, "It's one thing for me to be excited about something, but it's a bigger thing for me to

be excited for someone, and I am so excited for you." Sammy said back, "I love you too, Papa."

Posted by Dennis Hunter at 10:58 PM

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